



NEH Support for Special Collections

MARGARET S. CHILD

IT HAS BECOME ALMOST a truism that American librarianship has undergone a revolution in the past decade. A number of forces have been at work impelling rapid change, but the introduction of computers is usually identified as the prime mover in this revolution. The penetration of automation to every corner of the library, including many rare book rooms, and the many revisions of day-to-day operating procedures which it has brought about have been much discussed. Little or no systematic attention, however, has been paid to another force which, from the mid-1970s on, intersected with the rise of the computer and reinforced some of automation's most significant effects as well as helping American libraries to move forward on a number of other fronts. This force was the availability of federal grants for library and archival projects. The Research Collections Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) was formally established in the summer of 1974; the NEH Challenge Grant Program made its first official awards in 1977; Title IIC of the Higher Education Act was authorized in 1977 and began making grants in 1978; and the Records Program of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) was written into law in 1974, staffed in 1975, and made its initial awards in 1976. An in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the impact of the tens of millions of federal dollars which have been channeled from these sources over the past dozen years into organizing, preserving, and making more accessible the holdings of this country's research libraries, archives, historical societies, and other

Margaret S. Child is Assistant Director, Research Services, Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

repositories is much needed. This article is intended only to suggest some of the themes which such a study might pursue and to provide an impressionistic, limited, and admittedly personal overview of one segment of the subject—i.e., the grants made by one of the federal agencies, NEH, to one segment of the library and archival community—rare book libraries and special collections.

To begin with a little history, there were three main antecedents to the decision by the NEH administration to break out a specific funding line for research collections from the budget of the Division of Research.¹ The first was a general and growing awareness that the entire range of projects supported by the agency through all its divisions from fellowships to public programs ultimately depended to some extent on the use of research materials in the humanities. This realization was prompted by the fact that a steady stream of proposals was being received which had as their first stage some attempt to make such sources available. There were also a number of other projects being submitted simply to arrange and describe, catalog, preserve, or otherwise make collections available because they could be shown to be *potential* building blocks for humanistic research. Second, in the early 1970s there was also increasing interest in state and local history as part of the preparations for the celebration of the Bicentennial, and many of the source materials relating to the events of the Revolution in various localities were totally inaccessible. Finally, the Independent Research Libraries Association (IRLA) made a direct approach to the chairman of NEH to ask for help to stem the side of at least some of its members into deficit financing. This request prompted the preparation of an internal staff report that examined the financial history of several IRLA member libraries over the past decade and concluded that their plight was real, serious, and deserving of outside assistance.

Thus, at the inception of the program, special collections in general and rare book libraries in particular were assumed at least implicitly to be its primary clientele. Administrative decisions at the division level, such as the separation of research collections from research tools in July 1975, as well as the specific interests and objectives of successive NEH chairmen and their staffs, from time to time turned the program in new directions. The further evolution of the program was, however, shaped primarily by an ongoing interaction between prospective applicants and the program staff. To a large extent a funding program is like any business; it is responsive to its market. The kinds of proposals received, the information and opinions provided by the constituency in reviews, on panels, at professional meetings, and in visits to program staff, all contribute not only to decisions on what is to

NEH Support for Special Collections

be funded in any given cycle but also to revisions of the guidelines, to the information given to prospective applicants, to the kind of personnel recruited, and indeed to the attitudes and emphases of staff. Thus, although it was several years before a staff member with specific experience in rare book librarianship joined the program, that segment of the library community participated in the symbiotic relationship between the program and its market from the very first.

A similar pattern lies behind the establishment of the Challenge Grant Program three years later. The financial difficulties of the IRLA libraries, especially of the New York Public Library, and of a number of other important cultural institutions, such as museums, were the primary impetus behind the desire by both endowments to create a new type of program. In general, the addition of the challenge grant authority to their enabling legislation marked a recognition by both agencies and by Congress that project support alone was insufficient to ensure the financial health of key institutions: universities, colleges, museums, public libraries, public broadcasting stations, humanistic research centers, institutes, associations, university presses, historical societies, research libraries, etc. In fact, the experience of Research Collections had suggested that a project grant often increased the operating expenses of the recipient institution. Not only did the institution have to bear the cost of planning the project and contributing substantial sums in cost-sharing, but it was left with the ongoing expense of maintaining, servicing, and preserving the collections organized under a grant. Meanwhile, the operating costs of institutions were rising rapidly in the inflationary climate of the 1970s, and income from conservatively managed endowments was simply not keeping up. Challenge grants were devised as a means of helping institutions to help themselves: by providing operating funds to tide them over immediate financial crises, by increasing their endowments through fund-raising in the private sector with the incentive of a NEH grant to spur contributions, and by reexamining the ways in which their endowments were invested and managed.

The Division of Research itself and its subsequent Research Collections Program had been making matching grants to the New York Public Library since 1972, with the match required increasing to two to one in the later grants. Although various activities of the library were highlighted in each of the proposals, these grants were basically for ongoing operational support to enable the library to weather New York City's own fiscal crises and to stay in the forefront of the nation's libraries. In addition, in 1976 the program made three "experimental" awards—to the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Maryland

Historical Society, and the Newberry Library—to test the challenge grant concept, particularly the capacity of research libraries and historical societies to raise significant sums of money successfully. Over the decade since the inception of the Challenge Grant Program, a number of the nation's leading rare book libraries have been transformed by the infusion of funds stimulated by this award program. Many have undergone extensive physical renovation or expansion. Their collections have benefited from the installation of modern climate control systems and the construction of sophisticated conservation laboratories manned by trained staff. Staff salaries have been raised, and more highly qualified personnel have been recruited. They have become the sites for expanded educational programs undertaken either with their own resources alone or in conjunction with universities and colleges. Similarly, they have expanded “community” programming directed to children, young people, and adults. Finally, many now have their own highly professional fundraising offices or participate actively in the development efforts of the larger institution of which they are members.

It should not be assumed that these grants have gone only to the best known institutions. A significant number of small- and medium-sized college and university rare book rooms, public libraries, and special libraries have also received challenge grants for the same purposes as have their more famous fellows. Perhaps the most important result of the Challenge Grant Program has been the realization that it is indeed possible to raise money—often very large sums of money—for libraries and particularly for rare book libraries. Some of this might have happened anyway as part of the trend toward the “marketing of America” described in the popular press, but the challenge grant program provided a substantial incentive for institutions, which had traditionally kept a very low profile, to join that trend.

Although a similar evaluation of the impact of the awards made by the Research Collections Program would probably not show the same kind of dramatic changes which can be hypothesized for challenge grants, nonetheless a more systematic study than is attempted here would undoubtedly provide illuminating insights into the relationship of federal funding to the evolution of American rare book libraries and librarianship during the past decade. The research for this article has not included such an in-depth analysis, chiefly because it soon became apparent that digging out the essential information from the grant files would be a massive undertaking. Any such study should also be based on more than the official files. In addition to an examination of the original proposals and final narrative reports submitted by each

NEH Support for Special Collections

grantee, it should include a survey of the directors and/or staffs of the several projects to determine their actual long-term results. Only by doing this kind of follow-up can a conclusion be reached about whether or not the grants actually accomplished what they were intended to.

In order to expedite this laborious process, brief descriptions were reviewed of all the grants related even indirectly to the development of rare book librarianship made from its inception to the present by the Research Collections Program.² Each was assigned to one of eight general categories. An attempt was then made to consider, albeit impressionistically rather than systematically, how these projects had affected both individual institutions and the field in general. The awards have been appraised both individually—especially in the case of some pioneering awards—and cumulatively. In selecting these grants from the total made by the program during the period, a broad definition of rare book libraries was used. Included were all projects dealing with materials which would normally be housed in a rare book room or administered by a special collections department. In some instances it was difficult to know what to do with “level five” collections as defined by the Research Libraries Group (RLG) conspectus, but for the most part they have been included.³ The categories into which the grants were grouped were: manuscripts; rare books per se; comprehensive collections on a specific subject or area, i.e., “level five” collections; ancient records (papyri, tablets, etc.); and microforms of any such materials. All of these were, at heart, cataloging projects. Then there were bibliographies, guides, indexing projects, or databases providing access to such materials; projects to conserve or preserve same; and projects intended to advance the overall field of librarianship which impacted at least in part on rare book libraries. It was also at times difficult to make an assignment along the grey borderline between manuscripts and archival collections. Again the tendency has been toward inclusiveness although twentieth-century materials have in general been excluded. Also excluded have been photographs, films, artifacts, oral histories, sound recordings, and architectural records.

As has already been suggested, the initial thrust of the program and the meat and potatoes part of its diet came from the cataloging projects. Program staff often thought of these as efforts to clean out the attics or to empty the boxes in the basements of the repositories concerned. To some extent they were just that, although the attics and basements always had to be shown to contain materials of demonstrable significance to humanistic research. It should also be noted that fairly early on, the program established a policy that the collections, for which funds were being sought, could not have been purchased because the institution

was expected to process those from their own resources. The strongest applications were those in which the collections had been acquired many years earlier under a previous administration in something resembling a fit of absence of mind. Well-run modern institutions were assumed to be sufficiently strong minded not to solicit and certainly never to accept collections which could not be cataloged within a reasonable period of time using the institutions' own resources or additional funding obtained as part of the gift.

There is a veritable profusion of riches under the "catalogs" rubric, be they rare books per se or "level five" collections—the early children's books at the Morgan Library, the 17th and 18th century American printed broadsides at the American Antiquarian Society, the University of Tulsa McFarlin Library collection of 8000 publications written by and about native Americans, the James Weldon Johnson collection at the Beinecke Library at Yale, the Yiddish book collection at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the collections at the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University, and the Mennonite Historical Library of Goshen College. This brief sampling provides an indication of the range and depth of print collections brought under bibliographic control by these awards. In some instances, these projects resulted in a published catalog; from the latter 1970s onward it was customary to require that the records be entered into a national bibliographical network.

The same kind of treasures could be cited for the manuscript collections. In both categories, there were a considerable number of grants to gain control over all, or a substantial portion of, the rare holdings of an institution. The medieval Spanish manuscripts at the Hispanic Society of America, many of the manuscript collections in the Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Delaware historical societies, the Tibetan texts of the Field Museum in Chicago—these are typical of the manuscript materials cataloged with the help of NEH awards. Many of these projects also resulted in the publication of guides to the collections, in the better preservation of the materials themselves through refolding, boxing, and conservation treatment as well as in occasional microfilming, both for preservation and better access. In a few cases, grants were made to catalog manuscripts in institutions outside the United States, for example in one of the monasteries on Mount Athos in Greece. The rationale here was that publication of a catalog would facilitate research by American scholars and indeed that it might be useful to know what was there even if direct access was difficult. In a number of other instances, the collections cataloged were microfilms of foreign manuscripts such as the Florida Borderlands

NEH Support for Special Collections

collection of microforms of Spanish documents at the University of Florida.

Almost inevitably, as each cycle produced its crop of similar applications and as experience was gained in evaluating them and preparing the conditions for an award, the issue of standards began to arise. This was in part dealt with informally. Strong proposals served as models; staff from one project acted as consultants to others; the program's guidelines were made more explicit. The introduction of automation and the obvious advantages of inputting to a national database records produced under a grant, provided further justification for demands for uniformity of practice. These pressures impacted most strongly on archival and manuscripts projects in which the formats of catalogs, finding aids, and guides were carefully scrutinized by reviewers, panelists, and program staff. These led eventually to two grants in 1980 and 1981 to the Society of American Archivists (SAA) for the development of the MARC archives and manuscripts format by Richard Lytle and David Bearman. The same pressures prompted an award in 1980 to the Council of National Library and Information Associations to underwrite some of the costs of having three Library of Congress staff members prepare comprehensive cataloging manuals for graphics, manuscripts, and motion pictures and video recordings.

A similar effort was undertaken by IRLA under the leadership of Marcus McCorison of the American Antiquarian Society on behalf of the rare book community. IRLA received a small NEH award in 1979 to enhance the MARC II format to accommodate the special bibliographic information of particular interest to rare book librarians and scholars using such collections. Although only a few of the recommended additions to the format were initially approved by MARBI, the cause has subsequently been taken up by the Standards Committee of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL).⁴

The development of standards was, however, never a primary objective of the Research Collections Program, but rather simply a way to help ensure that funds would be efficiently employed and that the results of a project would be usable by the entire community. The whole process of advising an applicant was also of course a good deal easier if one could simply point to a standard and say, "follow it." Nonetheless, it should be stressed that the goal of the program was first, last, and always simply to make research resources available for use by scholars in the humanities, and all other projects were important only insofar as they were a means to that end.

Along with the cataloging and processing projects already described, bibliographies and guides were also seen as ways of making humanistic sources more accessible for scholarly use. Programmatically, these were part of Research Collections at its inception; they were then administratively shifted to Research Tools; ultimately they rejoined what eventually became Research Resources. This category is probably best exemplified by two massive projects which have sent their missives and, on occasion, their emissaries into every rare book library in the United States: the *Eighteenth Century Short Title Catalog* (ESTC) and the North American Imprints Project (NAIP). Both were natural outgrowths of earlier efforts, the revisions of Pollard and Redgrave and of Wing (both also underwritten by the Research Collections Program of NEH), and of the American Antiquarian Society's ongoing efforts to bring all of its holdings under bibliographical control. Each has been a model of both national and international cooperation. They have also served as stimuli to institutions throughout the country to catalog their holdings from these periods. The ESTC database is now of a size to make it a valuable tool for identifying bibliographic entities and for doing research on a particular topic. More than 30,000 NAIP records, representing the holdings of the American Antiquarian Society have also been loaded into the Research Libraries Information Network. In contrast to ESTC, these are full MARC records including some of the added fields for rare book cataloging referred to earlier. Eventually, all the NAIP records from both the society and other contributing libraries will be included in the ESTC file, an event expected to occur at the end of 1988. In addition, the NAIP project has received a Title IIC award to add subject headings to all the records contributed by other libraries and match them with the Readex microprint edition of the publications themselves. Thus this project too will ultimately provide an extraordinarily useful and lasting foundation for all research using bibliographic information on American imprints up to 1800.

Concentration on the two Goliaths in this category should not lead one to ignore the other kinds of useful projects which were also funded: bibliographies of the works of individual authors or of types of publications such as late nineteenth-century American law books; guides to manuscripts on certain topics, such as manuscript sources of Renaissance polyphonic music; or of specific kinds of manuscripts, such as fifteenth-century Spanish poetry. An impressive array of standard reference works has been produced and is presumably making the daily operations of rare book and special collections librarians

NEH Support for Special Collections

throughout the country easier as they seek to answer reference queries or direct patrons to useful collateral material.

Another mechanism identified early on in the program's history as a way of enriching and making more accessible the corpus of research sources available to the American humanist was microfilming. Some fifteen projects were funded to film materials in foreign repositories and in a few instances in private hands. These ranged from replication of materials relating to a single individual—Giuseppi Verdi, for the Archive of the American Institute for Verdi Studies at New York University—to a series of grants made over almost fifteen years to underwrite both the acquisition of additional films and their cataloging for the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. Another decade of support went to Walter Harrelson of Vanderbilt University to film the earliest manuscripts of Ethiopian orthodox churches and monasteries. Copies of these films were also deposited at the Hill Library where they were cataloged and made available for use by American scholars. Given the ensuing political problems of that country, this may indeed have been a rescue mission of great importance to a number of fields of study. Grants were also made to film materials already in American repositories, both to preserve them and to make them more accessible through loan or sale of the film. One of the earliest such awards was to the Leo Baeck Institute in New York City to film its holdings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German Jewish periodicals. Another supported the filming of the Indian Archives of the Oklahoma Historical Society. Awards were made to the Houghton Library at Harvard for three very different projects: (1) processing and filming the Archives of the Republic of Georgia; (2) filming the library's accession records and manuscript indexes both for preservation and reporting to The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC); and (3) filming its early manuscripts and photographing their illuminations in order to reduce the need to handle the originals and thus help to ensure their preservation.

These and some dozen other awards made during the 1970s and early 1980s laid the foundation for the establishment of the Office of Preservation in early 1984. In addition to the benefits to the grantees, they served to familiarize NEH program staff and administrators with the preservation issue and to contribute to the growth of a preservation movement in the nation's libraries and archives. It might even be claimed that this series of NEH grants was crucial in creating the infrastructure which made possible the current explosion of concern about preservation of library materials as well as the concomitant

appointment of preservation officers and the establishment of preservation programs in a rapidly increasing number of institutions. For example, there was the series of grants which explored the feasibility of, established and then supported the training program for conservators and preservation administrators at Columbia University. Even before that, a 1979 award to Yale University to survey its collections, to train interns, to prepare disaster plans, and to improve both storage and treatment of its holdings provided a cadre of trained technicians, many of whom are still active in the field, and a model program which remains the envy of other research libraries. It also provided the best data available to date on patterns of deterioration.⁵ Similarly, the creation of a field services program at the North East Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) in 1980 has made possible the gradual education of an entire region's repositories to preservation issues, remedial measures at scores of institutions, and again, the creation of a model program for other regions to emulate. Nationally, the spin-off from the Association of Research Libraries' (ARL) 1979 award "to design and test a self-study procedure to identify and address preservation problems" continues in institution after institution. The 1981 grant to the Research Libraries Group to develop a cooperative preservation microfilming program has had an almost equally wide ripple effect. Even some small grants, such as that to James Reilly of the Rochester Institute of Technology to develop and evaluate new preservation methods for nineteenth-century photographic prints, have been and will continue to serve as basic underpinnings for this developing field.

The final category to be considered is again a small but influential number of grants which stimulated the growth of automation in American libraries. Like the preservation awards just mentioned, these were intended to be of benefit to all libraries. Although some individual projects were of more immediate interest to rare book libraries than were others, it is probably safe to say that all of them have affected or eventually will affect the way in which most rare book libraries function. This aspect of the program got underway in late 1975 and early 1976 with grants to Stanford University for what was then the university libraries' online automation system—BALLOTS—to support multi-institutional services and to the original RLG for development of its automated capabilities. These were followed in 1977 by the first of two awards to the University of Chicago for further development of its library data management system. In the same period, a large matching grant went to the Library of Congress to edit the bibliographic data for humanities serials being contributed to the CONSER database on OCLC. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s the program con-

NEH Support for Special Collections

tinued to support the development of particular automated systems. These awards, however, were soon clearly focused on those which offered the potential for serving a nationwide community of users. The Bibliographic Standards Development Program of the Council on Library Resources, which received one of the largest matching awards ever to be made by the program, was intended to develop standards and mechanisms to facilitate improved coordination among systems with the goal of ultimately linking the several networks with each other and with the Library of Congress. Support for RLG moved from the early development of BALLOTS and RLG's own automation projects cited earlier to funding for the development of a capability to include records in East Asian characters (1980) and other non-Roman characters (1982) in what had by then become the RLIN database. Of more immediate interest to rare book and special collections librarians was the series of grants made first to SAA (see earlier discussion) and then to RLG which resulted in that utility's bringing up the MARC archives and manuscripts format and thereby making possible the development of a database of collection-level descriptions.

Cumulatively, these grants permitted custodians of archival and manuscript materials to enjoy for the first time the possibilities of rapid access to information on the holdings of other repositories available for many print collections. This in turn has encouraged individual institutions to rethink their collection development policies with an eye to holdings elsewhere just as libraries are doing. As already noted, automation inevitably promotes standardization of practices and procedures far beyond the simple entry of information in a standardized format, and archival and manuscript repositories are only now beginning to deal with the ramifications of these pressures on what have heretofore been highly idiosyncratic operations.

What then has been the result of the expenditure of so many taxpayer dollars on the particular segment of the nation's cultural resources represented by rare book libraries and special collections? First, the big "blockbuster" projects might well never have been undertaken, especially those requiring extensive use of costly automation equipment and the creation of a quasi-permanent administrative structure both to run the project and to deliver the successive grants necessary to keep them alive. Similarly, the massive renovations and additions underwritten at least in part by challenge grants, such as those of the Folger, the John Hay, and the Newberry libraries, might not have been attempted, at least on such a comprehensive scale. The most striking overall effect, however, has been the speeding up of changes which would in all likelihood have occurred eventually anyway. Federal dol-

lars have served as a kind of fertilizer to spur growth in a number of directions. Automation and preservation are good examples of movements which would eventually have affected all libraries but which came more rapidly and had broader immediate impact because of the availability of federal money to ease their introduction and implementation. It should also be noted that the old maxim, "Money breeds money," applies to the public as well as to the private sector. Even before challenge grants, the fact that the federal government was supporting library projects provided an entrée for library administrators to private funding sources. Indeed, the matching mechanism, which NEH used from the start, encouraged the raising of private dollars to match the federal award. Moreover, many private foundations and individual donors were willing to accept the very fact of a NEH award as a justification for their also providing assistance, particularly as the rigor of the NEH review process became known and respected.

One could also count up a veritable host of specific "products" which resulted from NEH grants. Certainly, more collections are under bibliographic control, and intellectual access to many of them is easier from afar through published catalogs and guides as well as via OCLC and RLIN because of NEH support. This in turn has promoted greater use of materials which were previously inaccessible both literally and figuratively. It would be interesting to know the extent to which the increase in readership at given repositories is due to their collections being more widely known, again because of such grants. Even more interesting would be an attempt to track the intellectual trail of materials made accessible by such funding through lectures, symposia, and publications.

In addition, the same and other collections are often better housed and maintained, thanks in particular to challenge grant funded renovations and improvements in climate control as well as to better treatment in general because of greater awareness of preservation considerations. Some materials are indeed benefiting from the ministrations of professional conservators working in laboratories built with challenge grant monies or of preservation administrators trained with NEH support.

Furthermore, federal funds have allowed and even encouraged many of these libraries to assume a higher profile in their communities by helping to underwrite the costs of exhibitions and special programs aimed at wider audiences than those traditionally cultivated. Moreover, the simple fact of fund-raising has made them "go public" in a way previously unknown. Federal funding is best justified when it is used to meet a public need or serve a public good. Therefore, applicants to NEH

NEH Support for Special Collections

were always asked to demonstrate that their projects would produce "public" benefits. There was a general expectation that the projects would be models which others could emulate, that they would conform to standards so that results would be generally useful, and that they would enter into cooperative agreements to share products and information. These pressures were instrumental in shifting the focus of attention of rare book libraries outward and thereby changing them fundamentally. To use a well-worn but nonetheless useful cliché, they are no longer backwaters but have been drawn into the mainstream of American librarianship, into greater participation in the intellectual life of the country, and into a more active role in their communities. Of lesser significance but still important were some other assumptions which underlay much of the grant-making done by the Research Collections Program. Staff, reviewers, and panelists were typically American in believing that professionalism is better than amateurism, that new is frequently synonymous with better, and that progress is best assured through technological innovation. Although a thorough exploration of the full implications of these articles of faith would take another entire paper, suffice it to say here that each of these was to some extent at variance with the traditions of rare book librarianship in this country so that in those respects the effect of NEH grant-making was again to change the characters of the recipient libraries by encouraging the new and at times doing this at the expense of the old.

References

1. For the sake of clarity, the name "Research Collections Program" will be used throughout this article although it has been changed a number of times most recently to Reference Materials/Access.
2. I should like to thank Wanita Sage-Gagne, a student in the M.L.S. program at The Catholic University of America, for her assistance in doing the initial sorting of the grants into categories.
3. Atkinson, Ross W. "Selection for Preservation: A Materialistic Approach." *Library Resources & Technical Services* 30(Oct./Dec. 1986):344-46; and Child, Margaret S. "Further Thoughts on Selection for Preservation: A Materialistic Approach." *Library Resources & Technical Services* 30(Oct./Dec. 1986):355-56.
4. An excellent recent article covered clearly and succinctly the effort to make the MARC format more useful for rare book cataloging. See Flannery, Melissa C. "A Review of Recent Developments in Rare Book Cataloging." *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 7(Fall 1986):55-62.
5. Walker, Gay, et al. "The Yale Survey: A Large-Scale Study of Book Deterioration in the Yale University Library." *College & Research Libraries* 46(March 1985):11-32.

This Page Intentionally Left Blank